There's Something Besides the Cocktail in The Bronx

They'll Check Your Baby for You in Front of a Department Store, or Carve You a Beautiful Tombstone

By Djuna Barnes

One gentleman immediately started a cry of "There's a specimen," and kept it up for the rest of the afternoon

SOME ONE said to me the other day: "Now, there's The Bronx; so very few people think of The Bronx, even those who live in it, aside from the occasional fact absorber, who doles out statements that it is sixty-four miles square and that it is the city of babies."

And something further that he said brought back to me suddenly a memory of when I also lived in The Bronx.

Funny, the first thing I recalled was a stonecutter, an artist of his kind, who worked in a tombstone yard all day long with hammer and chisel. A gray-haired man with keen, melancholy eyes, who hardly ever raised them from his stone, save occasionally to speak to me, lamenting the change in people's taste in carving. He used to say:

"There were days when tombstone engraving was as much an art as sculpture. I have carved many a superb leaf and cut many a weeping figure and child; none seemed to be weeping in their souls as mine seems to be weeping. One cemetery keeper told me that on a certain monument the sod was never dry; this was the one on which stood my veiled figure. That may be exaggerated, but you get the feeling; now"—he would make a slight movement with his chisel—"they only want fancy lettering, ugly and deformed and in bad taste. I shouldn't say only, but it is in the majority."

He was a good man, and a clever man, and when the day's work was through he used to stand at the gate at the top of the little hill and, turning his eyes toward the town, would sniff the evening air.

But surely, thought I, this is not what that gentleman meant by The Bronx, and again my memory played into my hands. It began at the Bronx Botanical Gardens. It was early morning, oh, very early morning, hardly more than half-past seven. The grass was still wet and the man who swept the steps was on the third stair. In the distance the soiled white jumper of the park wastepaper gatherer winked in and out between bushes and hedges as he went back and forth with his stick with the sharp end, searching for yesterday's newspapers and love letters.

Objective: Clason Point

It was the meeting place of some suburban society of bug hunters. They met once a year at the Botanical gate, and I was going with them. Presently they appeared. The first, an old gentleman, thin to the point of snapping, carried a large butterfly net and an overcoat. He wore spectacles far down on his nose and talked in heavy grammatical polysyllables about "any further impedimenta," and the like, and walked with a slight limp. After him came a middle aged woman from South Carolina, who wore a tight bodice, mittens and a pair of easy juliets. She was very round of face, jolly and determined on specimens. She said, indeed, that she had not found a really good specimen since last year at this same time, and that it was still in alcohol, much to the disgust of her unbotanical parent.

Then a stout gentleman, with very tight breeches and a very red face, and who struggled with three immense volumes, in which he was going to press his discoveries, came up behind the lady from South Carolina. A fourth and a fifth and a sixth and a final very thin small woman, ended the procession.

It seemed they were going to Clason Point.

On the Trail of The Fiddler Crab

I shall never forget that ride. It was the most mysterious and formal affair. Every one was being introduced to every one else. They seemed to have met for several years, but in the space between times they forgot each other, and some of them giggled on being reintroduced, saying things like:

"Well now, I do recall, you are the man who had an aunt who had water on the knee, and how is the dear old lady?" or: "John Matthews, John—oh, yes, it was you who discovered that cryptogamous plant." And bowing with great pride, the gentleman addressed would answer: "I am."

Finally they all climbed out, flinging themselves like bombs into the landscape. One gentleman immediately started a cry of "There's a specimen!" and kept it up for the rest of the afternoon. Two of them sat down among the rushes and began a discussion on the merits of love and hate. One maintained that love was stronger and therefore better than hate, and the other became enraged at the mere suggestion and said that he had been concentrating on hate since the hogs had been found dead in 1900, and that his teeth had only lately been successful in coming together on edge.

Suddenly the little thin lady screamed, "Fiddler crabs, fiddler crabs!" and John Matthews rose slowly and menacingly and approached them.

They were whirling around on uneven claws at the bottom of a very shallow pool, almost a mud puddle, nothing more.

This caused a great deal of excitement for a few moments; they seemed to have quite forgotten that fiddler crabs could hardly be called rare objects or real discoveries.

One or two of them had wandered away into the woods, one got lost and only wrote to another member of the party six months later that he had reached home safely.

Then there was the stop at the inn. A low-ceilinged house with six mounted deer heads and a stuffed snake under a glass, and a barkeeper with an immense set of whiskers.

Here I paused again in my memory, saying: "Is this, then, what they mean when they say The Bronx?"

And I dropped this memory for one when I was quite young and sneaked into Poe's house, and creeping up into the garret found a little child's boot thrust away behind a beam. A dirty, worn little shoe with turned up toe and worn down heel. A shoe made of red leather with two buttons missing, and I thought of the "Fall of the House of Usher" and of the "Telltale Heart," and shuddered with unbecoming pleasure, thinking: "This is the shoe of that man, who made my brother scream in his sleep last night."

But when I got home mother laughed at me and said dozens of families had lived in Poe's house since his day, and no doubt it was the shoe of Mrs. O'Connor's baby, the one who died of the colic last spring.

And then I thought of the quarries of Fordham. Would Fordham be considered a part of The Bronx?

I couldn't quite get away from Fordham without a memory of a great and beautiful negro who used to squat with a drill all day, turning and spitting on his hands, with a background of cranes and swinging buckets and dust.

Up in the trees above these quarries a black box stood chained to a willow, with the word "Danger" written in red across its tar paper. A box that we used to run past with frightened breath, a box that our father had told us contained dynamite.

"What for?"

"For the blasting."

And in the afternoons standing on our porch we could hear the warning cry "Fire!" as the rumble of torn rock filled the air with a low moan and the odor of powder drifted up through the ravines.

And could this be called appropriate to the suggestion?

And there was the reservoir. We used to walk around the rim of the reservoir waving our hands to the babies that passed below on a lower and far less exalted plane.

Give 'Em Facts

And Pelham Bay, where Sydney went when he got in the Marines, and Fleischman's Café, where Alex and Courtney used to spend too much time—well, all of these places were supposed to be in The Bronx. But a man at my side kept saying, as I walked down Mott Avenue looking for the Italian gardens that dot the railway tracks: "That isn't what they meant by The Bronx at all; it's the 'Hub,' 149th Street—the 'cattle chute,' the great transfer point. Give them something about that, or about the floor of Hunt's Point Palace; it's the biggest dancing floor in the world, you know. And then tell them about the Park Hotel, that would surely interest them; that's where their business men dine on finnan haddie and alligator pears; or, if that won't do, tell them all about the bridge system. The Willis Avenue bridge, the Third Avenue bridge, the 129th Street bridge, the 135th Street bridge, the 149th Street bridge and the 155th Street bridge, the Washington Heights bridge. Tell them about the civic centres at Tremont Avenue—I saw a man run over on that avenue by a garbage cart"——

"Wait!" I cried in horror, holding up my hands.

"Tell them about O'Hara's Hall, at 200th Street; tell them about almost anything, but give them facts."

"Facts," I said slowly. "My God, have we come to that?"

"Well, at least give them a little talk about theatres—there's the Art Theatre, the Empire Theatre, Miner's, the Follies, Loew's—at least tell them about the Bronx Opera House and where it is situated."

"Where?" I inquired.

"Four hundred and thirty-six East 149th Street," he answered.

"These things mean nothing," I said. "The real Bronx has nothing to do with facts, as the real Greenwich Village has nothing to do with facts, as no real good woman has anything to do with facts. Why, the only reason people consent to live in cities at all is because there, at least, you may get away from facts."

He looked troubled. "Tell them about the clubs then—now there's"——

"No!"

"Well, then, the asylums and homes."

"Again, no."

"Homes for the blind, the irreconcilable, friendless, demented, aspiring, incurable, enraged."

"Do not jest," I warned.

"I'm not. The banks, then; you must not overlook the banks."

"No banks."

"Well, at least, then, you must write something about schools—about the Hall of Fame."

"Why should I? I never went to the first and will never get to the second."

"Oh, indeed," he said scornfully. "Are you going to be purely personal?"

"I am—every one is who writes well."

"What about the convent schools? Are you going to leave them out?"

"At last," I returned, "you have mentioned something that is almost personal to me. With a clear conscience I may write about a convent school, one that stood up on a slight rise—quite a grim affair—where a lovely girl, a red-haired creature, was brought up. Ah, truly she was a lovely thing. So pure, so white, so sad. She had the most sorrowful mouth I have ever seen, yet she was quite gay at times. But off and on she wanted to die. Sometimes she thought of being a nun; once she wanted to run away to the West and become a gold miner's bride—'Because they need some of my despair,' she would say. Ah, yes," I continued, "I could write endlessly about that Bronx school. I can still see it, quite a distance away from where I first stood when I looked at it; a few figures, about the size of a well used pencil, were walking around, and my friend of the beautiful red hair was no longer there."

"Where was she?" he said in an awed voice.

"Married," I answered, "married, and can be found at almost any mass, dropping pennies into the poor box or lighting a candle."

"Have you seen the mothers checking their babies outside of the department stores?" he said, changing the subject.

"Yes," I answered, "but before you go on about that I want to add that she had a head of hair like a murder—you know what I mean—it lay all over the pillow like blood—sort of divine, like a Rossetti. What were you saying about babies?"

"It's demure they were in them days . . . the horses and the dogs following them, and the doves dying as they flew for their high envy."

"There used to be more Irish up here than there are now."

"Ah, the Irish," I enthused, "what wonderful people they are. You know I would rather go to Ireland than to Paris. There's little use saying: 'Let you come now, I'm saying, to the lands of Iveragh and the Reeks of Cork, where you won't set down the width of your two feet and not be crushing fine flowers, and making sweet smells in the air,' said I, quoting. And then I recalled what an old washwoman had said to me once: 'It's demure they were in them days, looking neither to right nor to left, and the horses and the dogs following them, and the doves dying as they flew for their high envy."

"There are still farmers, though," he answered, "and farm papers, too."

"The Fair Good Days Are Past"

"And them driving into market," I said, nodding. "Ah, it's well I know them. As my washwoman used to say: 'There they do be coming in the light of the dawn, with their fair heads of cabbage and their waving bunches of onions, and them an hour out of the dear earth only, and them a-bumpin' and a-joggin' down to the streets where those will eat them as has no notion of the great beauty is in the earth and air before they could taste them at all, and men laboring and women a-toiling and children a-growin' up to make more vegetables for the bad at heart.'"

We were almost back at "the Hub," and I said that I thought the best thing to do would be to visit a cabaret—"Sennet's," I suggested.

We pushed open a green door and entered an empty hall, and backing into another door we peered into the gloom where a waiter was dusting the tables.

"Cabaret?" I inquired.

"Bartender tell you," he answered, and went back to his dusting.

We walked into the bar. The bartender shook his white head. "At eight to-night—not now."

"No four o'clock teas?"

"No, ma'am."

"So much for the living," I said. "Let us hunt up my old friend the stonecutter."

"He's gone; they have a young man up there now who sells the old man's work at a bargain—hard luck, eh?"

"Heavens, what became of the old gentleman?"

"He married one of your Irish women, and keeps a farm."

Back at the cattle chute I ran for a train and bumped into a woman reading a book of poetry.

"The days are gone, the fair good days are past;
And in their place a leisure all distraught:
With hurry and with unimportant gain."

John Bull, Convalescent, Doing Nicely, Thank You

By P. W. Wilson

LONDON, February 4.

AFTER twelve months of absence from England I noticed at once how severe had been the final strain of war on that country and how slowly the people are recovering from it. At Liverpool there was no boat train for London, no taxis from the landing stage to Lime Street station, and we had to pile our baggage on a horse wagon, which happened to put in an appearance.

Our journey "to town" was one-third longer than usual and quite devoid of eating facilities. Beyond a piece of war cake I had nothing from 5:30 a. m., on the boat, till 4:30 p. m., when I reached home. In all the compartments of the train people were standing, and also in the corridors. The distinction between first and third class was quite obliterated. It was like six hours at the crowded period of the New York subway. Nobody complained. Passengers shared sandwiches with soldiers. Children were cheerful, and apparently I alone had influenza.

At Lime Street station a woman porter, who had been at it three years, handled my bags. She was good humored and capable. When we reached Willesden Junction another woman took the tickets. There was no nonsense about her and she tackled the Tommies with equal firmness. Khaki was everywhere. Streets, restaurants, stations are crowded with troops, drifting hither and thither, many of them, I suppose, on well earned leave. Their faces are patient, sunburnt, strong and aged by endurance. Many of these men have fought continuously for years. With the pressure lifted they, and indeed the whole nation, have to find their bearings afresh. Demobilization is proceeding, but only at a prudent pace, for peace has yet to be signed and the world is restless. Broadly, I should say that Britain, and Europe doubtless as well, is like a man in a hospital after a severe operation in surgery, whose wounds tend to be septic and to give him a temperature. It is a case for careful nursing.

No Sugar Yet For London

There is, I suppose, enough food, but, after America, diet here suggests privation. The popular restaurants—Lyons and A. B. C.'s—corresponding to your Child's, are so understaffed that clerks and typists often get no lunch at all. Tea, which means so much in England, is poor. For coffee many people use little books of "sweet-leaf" or prepared paper, the size of postage stamps, which are supposed to serve as sugar. Pending the arrival of my ration book I took a vegetable lunch which I think would have emptied any eating place on Broadway, but at tea there was actually jam in the cake and some powdered sugar on top. My wife expressed surprise. Eggs and some fruit are obtainable, but at prices which for most incomes are prohibitive.

At London streets I was astonished. They were three-quarters clear of traffic. Some private automobiles are said to be running, but up to date I have not seen one. Motor busses are few and far between and usually full before they reach you. Occasional taxis and resuscitated horse-drawn vehicles complete the picture. Naturally, the sidewalks are crowded with people who have to use their own feet. The tubes also, with much reduced schedules, are packed with straphangers. Yet amid it all the people go quietly on with their work, accepting inconveniences as part of the job to be finished, and supporting the government of the day with astounding readiness. Many of them look worn. Even the young have left youth behind. But there is no perceptible wavering.

Of the women it is hard to write without seeming to exaggerate. There is little obtrusive mourning, but scarcely a costume shows bright color. Thousands and thousands are wearing old clothes, with stoical indifference to feminine coquetry, and the entire demeanor of these subdued, grave-faced heroines suggests that they have no time and no energy to think of their looks. They proceed on their errands, quickly, determined to manage things somehow, and expecting constant perplexity. Many of them know that the war has deprived them of any hope of a husband and home of their own, which means that they have become in a sense brides of their native land, with a patriotism more intense than a man's because it is the one emotion left. For these women no work is too hard. The idea of saving hands and complexion has long vanished in the crucible of war. Rough toil has often hardened and wrinkled the appearance, but unselfishness has made hearts tender which might have been far otherwise under the former rivalries of fashion.

There is quite a famine in houses. I could sell mine for hundreds of pounds more than it cost to build. Furniture, too, is at a premium. With manufacture suspended and import difficult, everybody is short of everything that wears out. Also, after so many war weddings, young people are wanting to set up homes. And they must make use of second hand goods. The demand for labor is enormous. One catering firm alone could employ another thousand waitresses. The mere overdue painting of ordinary dwelling houses would keep that trade going for years. Apparently, the state will find no difficulty in selling munition factories for conversion into private industries. Great commercial activity is expected, provided always that labor avoids cessation of work. I find few if any indications of Bolshevism and do not suppose that we shall see any troubles more serious than strikes. But, of course, everything depends on the government proceeding resolutely with plans of reconstruction, without allowing any conservative interests to hamper whatever measures are needed on the land and elsewhere. One misfortune is that the government will be needed at the peace conference just when its attention should be devoted to the scarcely less urgent problems at home.

Against Germany there is a deep and, in its way, a very terrible anger. It is a passion as remote from mere revenge as the awful fulminations of the old Hebrew prophets. The incorrigible cynicism with which Germans have sent home our prisoners, to die on arrival from maltreatment and malnutrition, simply solidifies the country for stern justice. Men with a life-long reputation for gentle behavior and a merciful disposition talk of Germany's moral responsibility in tones of unalterable resolution, and women—take, for instance, a well known and most kindly disposed Christian Scientist—set their faces like adamant. In his election speeches Mr. Lloyd George undoubtedly played on these sentiments, which are largely responsible for his immense majority. But he did not create such feelings. They are inevitable. If Britain had been populated by Americans their impulses would have been the same. And I am assured that while the financial claims of Britain on Germany are $24,000,000,000, or thereabouts, all our responsible leaders are agreed that we stand after France, Italy, Belgium and Serbia. I don't suppose that in the end we shall receive a cent.

Americans who still suppose that Britain is "stronger than ever she was" and richer, must allow me to dissent from their view. By every material test she has made an immense sacrifice and no colonies added to South Africa or to Australia will be the slightest economic compensation. I believe that the nation will gradually recover its fortunes, but it will be by hard work and a continuance of strict self-denial. Doubtless there have been profits made in certain industries which taxation has not yet recovered for the community. Under state regulated prices of food the grocers and other retail dealers seem to have done handsomely. Where commodities have been free from rations and selling schedules the natural instincts of mankind have led distributers at times to exploit the necessities of their neighbors. An income of $5,000 before the war is now worth $2,000, and I know of one case where a highly salaried official has sold his house and his automobile and gone into what Americans call an apartment dwelling. That instance must be typical of many others, and journals which specialize on advertisements of country estates for sale are full of attractive offers.

Britain Must Work to Recover

I see no indication that taxes are likely to be reduced in the near future. While the armistice tends to bring down expenditures there is still an immense outlay which it will take years to become normal. No one yet knows precisely how we stand, for we are building merchantmen and preparing to nationalize the railroads. Also, there are the claims of retiring officers, on which Sir Douglas Haig feels so strongly that he declines honors for his own services in the field until a proper arrangement is worked out. The development of education will require much building of schools, and 100,000 cottages or other dwellings are on the first and most urgent housing schemes. Unemployment is slightly increasing, but this fact is due to momentary failure in organization rather than to actual lack of work. In any event, the percentage of persons out of work is low. Some women, hitherto employed on munitions, seem ready to reconsider their former domestic service, but, taking the country as a whole, maids are still scarce, which means that many housewives have to do work to which before the war they were entirely unaccustomed.

Mrs. Wilson Didn't Curtsey

Evidently, the visit of President Wilson has been much appreciated. Knowing little of your political and other controversies, Britain regarded him simply as the elected representative of your nation and greatly enjoyed his brief, clear and often witty speeches. So far as I can learn at present, there was no hitch at all in the proceedings—the only sensation being the decision of Mrs. Wilson that as the first lady of her land it was not etiquette for her to curtsey at Buckingham Palace. This has immensely interested everybody and has by no means given offence—on the contrary, it is an open secret that the King and Queen have been delighted with their illustrious visitors, whose wide view of life and democratic outlook were greatly appreciated. In future communications I hope to mention many matters which show how genuine is Britain's affection for the United States. On our horizon your country is now the big new fact. Your attitude toward us is watched by every one with care—by some with solicitude, by most with entire confidence. A few are so foolish as to talk in terms of mistrust and jealousy. They are men suffering from nerve strain. It would be well, I think, if more American speakers were heard in Britain. But they must be men who understand our reserved ways—who will not be chilled by our reticences. We are not as good listeners as you; possibly we do more independent reading—though this is arguable. Our clubs are less highly developed. Our churches are less prominent in the national life. Anyway, I am quite sure that our respective nations are drawing closer—that our diplomatists are working together for the peace of the world—and that the great desire of Mr. Roosevelt, an entente, is on the way. It would be a mistake to hurry it. It would be a still greater mistake not to work for it.

The Young-Old Soldier

By Charles Hanson Towne

I MET him in London—
A lad of twenty-four;
He had been in the War three long years,
And he looked much more.

He told me his adventures
In Flanders, and on the Marne;
How he had slept out in the sleet,
Or in a filthy barn.

He told me, when I questioned him,
Of the sad sights he had seen;
Of the long hours of fighting,
And the brief waits between.

His face was lean and tragic,
His eyes looked far away,
As if he still saw Something
That haunted him night and day.

He had been gassed at Ypres,
And wounded at Bethune;
He recalled their carrying him in
Under a sullen moon.

I remember all he told me
One night in a London grill;
But one thing will haunt me forever;
And he looked so old and ill.

When he said it, this young lad,
(And so simply it was said):
"I have lost all my friends—
Every one is dead."

Do you wonder I remember?
Do you wonder his eyes are old?
Only a youth of twenty-four,
But his youth all told.

His boyhood gone like a shadow
On a garden wall;
Nothing of his school days to clutch at—
Nothing at all.

I tell you, War is a youth's game;
That is an old, old truth.
Play it, and perhaps you win;
But always you lose—your youth!